Political Machine Readings-Due Friday, September 16th at the end of the period (B Days) OR Wednesday, September 21st at the end of the period (A Days)

Part 1

In the nineteenth century, much of big city government in America was corrupt. Many

politicians took bribes and became rich. In return, they gave political favors and jobs.

One of the most famous political scandals of the era involved a New York City politician

known around town as “Boss” Tweed.

William Marcy “Boss” Tweed was born in 1823 in New York City. Tweed began his

political career in 1851 when, on his second try, he was elected to a local political seat.

He was elected as a representative to Congress the following year. However, Tweed

preferred local politics to his role in Congress.

In 1856 Tweed was elected to the board of city supervisors in New York City. He gave

city jobs to many people he knew. This group became known as the Tweed Ring. Then

Tweed focused his attention on Tammany Hall, the organization that controlled

Democratic nominations in New York City. In 1860 Tweed became the head of the

Tammany Hall general committee and gained control of Democratic Party nominations to

all city positions. Voter fraud was widespread, and Tweed openly paid for votes.

Tweed used his position in Tammany Hall to control Democratic politics in New York

City. Candidates Tweed supported were elected mayor, governor of New York, and

speaker of the state assembly. In return for Tweed’s support, politicians allowed Tweed

to name appointees to positions under their control. In this way, Tweed spread his support

and his power.

In 1863 Tweed was named deputy street commissioner. In that capacity he enlarged the

Street Department, rewarding his supporters with jobs. He also found a way to control

the city treasury and profited illegally from many city transactions. With Tweed’s

approval, contractors overcharged the city then shared the profit with him. The Tweed

Ring faked leases, padded bills, overpriced goods and services, and got kickbacks in

return. It is estimated that the Tweed Ring stole between $30 million and $200 million

from New York City.

In 1867 Tweed was elected to the state senate, where he continued to use rewards,

kickbacks, and bribery to expand his influence. Tweed received hundreds of thousands of

dollars from the Erie Railroad for his help in getting legislation passed that helped the

company.

By helping the poor, providing jobs, and in some cases giving people food and fuel,

Tweed ensured that many people would ignore his corruption Tweed also controlled

agencies that gave government money to charitable groups.

Tweed’s enemies in Tammany Hall eventually exposed his illegal activities, leaking

details about Tweed’s corruption to the New York Times. In 1872 Tweed was convicted

on 204 of 220 counts of failing to audit claims against the city. While in jail, he died ofheart failure. More than 100 years later, he still stands as a symbol of political corruption.

Part 2

“Everybody is talkin‘ these days about Tammany men growin’ rich on graft, but nobody

thinks of drawin‘ the distinction between honest graft and dishonest graft. There’s all the

difference in the world between the two. Yes, many of our men have grown rich in

politics. I have myself. I’ve made a big fortune out of the game, and I’m gettin’ richer

every day, but I’ve not gone in for dishonest graft—blackmailin' gamblers,

saloonkeepers, disorderly people, etc.—and neither has any of the men who have made

big fortunes in politics.

There’s an honest graft, and I’m an example of how it works. I might sum up the whole

thing by sayin‘: “I seen my opportunities and I took ’em.”

Just let me explain by examples. My party’s in power in the city, and it’s goin' to

undertake a lot of public improvements. Well, I’m tipped off, say, that they’re going to

lay out a new park at a certain place. I go to that place and I buy up all the land I can in

the neighborhood. Then the board of this or that makes its plan public, and there is a rush

to get my land, which nobody cared particular for before.

Or supposin‘ it’s a new bridge they’re goin’ to build. I get tipped off and I buy as much

property as I can that has to be taken for approaches. I sell at my own price later on and

drop some more money in the bank.

I’ll tell you of one [other] case. They were goin‘ to fix up a big park, no matter where. I

got on to it, and went lookin’ about for land in that neighborhood. I could get nothin' at a

bargain but a big piece of swamp, but I took it fast enough and held on to it. What turned

out was just what I counted on. They couldn’t make the park complete without Plunkitt’s

swamp, and they had to pay a good price for it. Anything dishonest in that?

Now, in conclusion, I want to say that I don’t own a dishonest dollar. If my worst enemy

was given the job of writin' my epitaph when I’m gone, he couldn’t do more than write:

‘George W. Plunkitt. He Seen His Opportunities, and He Took 'Em.’”

--Excerpted from Plunkitt of Tammany Hall by William Riordan

Questions: **Answer in COMPLETE SENTENCES. If you do not write in complete sentences, the highest grade you can earn is 65.**

1. What type of illegal activities did Boss Tweed engage in? Be specific.

1. Why did Tweed get away with the crimes he committed for so long?

1. How did Tweed make profits from New York City? Explain!
2. In your opinion, did Tweed contribute anything positive to society? Please be specific.

5. Do you buy the argument that Plunkitt (who succeeded Tweed as the boss of the

Tammany Hall machine in New York) was just taking advantage of opportunities? Why

or why not?